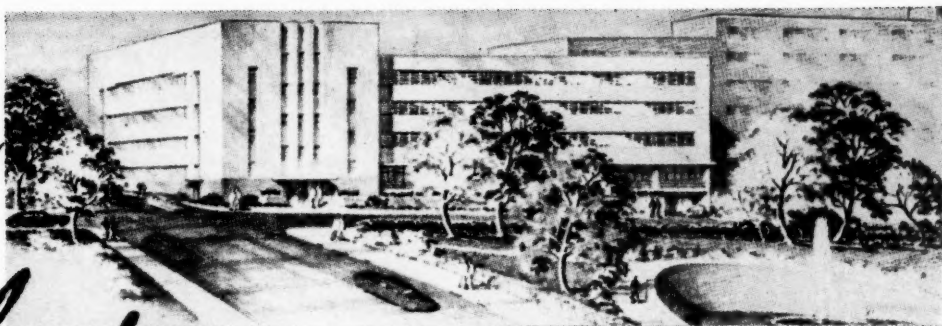


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LET'S HAVE BETTER RETAIL SELLING IN 1953*

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With the many changes which are constantly taking place in a dynamic economy such as ours—together with a change in our national administration—one hesitates to make any forecasts as to business prospects for the year ahead. However, one fact we must acknowledge and face as a certainty in 1953—a better job of retail selling **must** be done!

Nearly all those who do feel competent to make forecasts of business activity are predicting that 1953 will be a record year in all phases of our economy. Are we, as retailers, ready and able to provide the most essential link in the marketing chain—that of the final sale to the ultimate consumer—in order that the consumer might benefit from this prosperity? The answer to this question, unfortunately, is in most cases a negative one.

I shall attempt in this paper to point out several reasons why we must have better retail selling in 1953. I shall mention a number of basic reasons why retailers as a group are not doing the job of selling that they should be doing, and then I want to make a few constructive suggestions as to steps which I believe you, as retailers, can take in 1953 to improve your selling performance.

In this country we have had a tremendous increase in our power to produce. By the time our present military buildup is completed, our manufacturing facilities available for potential industrial output will have been increased by about twenty-five per cent. While many fear that our soil resources are being rapidly depleted, irrigation projects, soil conservation practices, fertilizers, and many new chemical soil conditioners assure a long and steady agricultural production potential.

Retailers today carry a large part of the responsibility of seeing that consumption is kept in line with our

vastly increased ability to produce. Has our American public's willingness to buy and consume gone up in proportion to our country's ability to produce? Have our people reached, or are they approaching, a so-called optimum standard of living, beyond which their desires cannot be aroused or where our powers of persuasion fail?

One heartening factor to partially offset the problems suggested above is often overlooked by both theoretical economists and by businessmen. The records of the United States Bureau of the Census, together with estimates made since the last Census was taken, reveal some very interesting facts. Every nine seconds a new child is born somewhere in this country. Every twenty-one seconds someone dies. Every two minutes someone immigrates into this country; while someone emigrates, or leaves the country, every seventeen minutes. The net result, which should make every retailer happy and a little bit more optimistic, is that a **new customer is added to our population every thirteen seconds!**

Most of us must admit that the standard of retail salesmanship in our stores today leaves much to be desired. Improvement in this phase of our operations is essential if our present high level of production and employment is to be maintained. Many of you have undoubtedly read the series of articles on "Selling—one of the great unsolved problems of capitalism," which has been running in *Fortune* for the past several months. In the July, 1952 issue, the fourth article in the series, entitled "What's Wrong With Retail Salesmanship?", gives the results of a survey among retail stores. This survey showed, "The average salesperson . . . is not only doing a poor selling job, in many cases he is actually **discouraging** customers from buying. Furthermore, his performance has been growing worse . . ." This is borne out by a University of Illinois study which showed that only one out of six salespersons in Illinois stores made any attempt at follow-up or

*Digest of an address given at the Southeastern Regional Conference of the National Association of Music Merchants, Inc., Dinkler-Ansley Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, on February 7, 1953. Dr. Johnson is Chairman of the Marketing Division, Atlanta Division, University of Georgia.

¹*Fortune*, April through November issues, 1952, Time, Inc. All quotations from *Fortune* reproduced by courtesy Time, Inc.

suggestion sales last year—compared with one out of three before the war. We cannot afford to continue this trend!

The *Fortune* article already mentioned went on to say, "The important question about retailing no longer is how much the nation's stores are selling; it is how much they are **not** selling. How many sales are retail salespeople fumbling—if not actually driving out of the stores—on any working day? Certainly it adds up to at least \$3 billion a year, and if a statistical answer could be pinned down it would be one of the most sensational loss figures in business history."

A better selling job in 1953 can be a product of just plain optimism, together with several positive steps which will be outlined later. We must **always be optimistic**; we must be constantly planning to do things **bigger and better** tomorrow. The best method of assuring the fruition of these plans is by starting toward their realization today—by taking steps to improve our sales productivity.

Are we sure that we are all thinking of the same thing when we talk about improving selling? The great humorist, Will Rogers, perhaps gave many of his readers the wrong impression when he defined salesmanship as "That which makes you buy something you don't need when you ain't (sic) got the money to pay for it." I like to think of salesmanship as a broad term which embraces everything that contributes to the salability of a product from the time it is conceived until it is finally used up, worn out, or destroyed. Applied to retailing, this means that it is something more than the public's impression of a retail clerk or so-called "clerking." There is infinitely more involved than just "order filling" or handing an article or service across the counter after it has been asked for.

Every sale process, as I see it, has at least five essential requirements. First, there must be a need. Then there must be a knowledge of that need. Thirdly, there must be a knowledge of a product or service to satisfy that need. There must be conviction—an understanding that the product or service is worth the money it costs in terms of measureable units of utility. Lastly, there must be money or credit available to make the final culmination of the sale possible. The customer should normally supply the first and the last requirement—the need and the ability to pay. The retail salesperson's responsibility is to supply or help to supply the middle three—the knowledge of the need, the knowledge of the product to satisfy the need, and the conviction.

Why do I feel there must be a better retail selling job done in 1953? The main reason is that retailers as a group are not doing the selling job that should be done. Why are they not doing the job? In many instances the promotional and sales efforts are uncontrolled and woefully misdirected. Large sums of money are spent for promotion and too-large sales forces are maintained. They are like the Kansas grasshopper, who was strong on distance but a little weak on direction! Stores must constantly keep their sights on the target—a profitable operation—and polish up and use skillfully their best and most effective weapons—their **salespeople**!

Too often salespeople spend their time talking, not to customers, but to other salespeople. Even when the talk is directed toward the customer, it may be so-

cially applicable but have no real business value. The social conversation should be saved for the Friday or Saturday night bridge table.

Customers are often judged wrongly; we cannot afford to offend or to underestimate a customer's ability to buy. There must be no mistaken identities.

Some stores fail to do a thorough job of selling because they fail to furnish the salespeople with the proper equipment to demonstrate the product they are supposed to sell. Just before this last Christmas, I wanted to buy some long-playing records of Christmas music. I went to one of the largest record departments in Atlanta, found the records which I thought I would like, and went to the try-out booth to hear what they sounded like. The machine was out-of-order; it would run but there was no sound. I finally was able to try the record on one of the record players in the main selling department. Then days later, out of curiosity, I went to the same record department and found the record player in the booth still out-of-order! There is no way of estimating the number of sales which were missed because of poor maintenance of the essential equipment.

A large proportion of salespeople have heard and read about the trend to self-service in retailing—they have taken it so seriously that that is what the customer gets. Salespeople must be impressed with the idea of serving people—that there is "Romance" in selling—constantly meeting new people, seeing new faces, being confronted with new challenges to their product and psychological know-how.

One of the greatest weaknesses is the lack of product knowledge. This was graphically illustrated in the following exchange of conversation between a salesperson and a research reporter on another study made recently by *Fortune* (July 1952):

"REPORTER: 'Does this Dyna-Shave stuff [*handling can*] give you as many shaves as a regular tube of shaving cream?'"

"SALESPERSON: 'Well . . . I don't know about that.' [*Rests his elbow alongside a display sign which says in large type that a can gives 150 SHAVES and lasts SIX MONTHS.*]"

"REPORTER: 'A can that big ought to last a long time.' [*Salesperson becomes interested; turns around and begins reading the display sign.*]' 'One hundred fifty shaves,' the salesman murmurs, almost to himself, then picks up a can and begins looking at it. If the reporter had only had a little more time, he would have sold him."

There are dozens of reasons why retailers are not doing the ideal selling job. Among these are: an over-emphasis on price, regardless of type of clientele; salespeople do not "trade up" enough to higher, more profitable price lines or to larger sizes; people forget to use "related selling" or suggestion sale techniques; they often fail just to "be courteous" or treat customers nicely. A little application of the Golden Rule would do wonders in eliminating the latter weakness.

While there is no point in trying to escape reality, we must recognize that there are many retailers who are doing a fair to good job of selling. In addition, there are many constructive steps which can be taken by retailers generally to improve the level of salesmanship in our stores.

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How can we attain better retail selling in 1953? Of first importance in the building of any organization is the attraction and selection of the caliber of people who will be able to do the job which is expected of them. Here is where retailers face a major test. While it cannot possibly be entirely accomplished in one or even a few years, there must be a setting of professional standards in the public mind. Many companies are doing the kind of public relations job which helps to mould a better public opinion of retailing as a profession. This is absolutely essential if retailing is to attract the type of young people who some day must be the top managers of the industry. However, the part of the retail organization which has the most contact with the public is the selling staff. It is the salesforce which is in "the driver's seat," so to speak, in the building of good will and respect for the profession. Once people are attracted to the industry, the task of selection is a problem for those trained in the specialized field of personnel management.

Better selling can be attained by effective training of those who have been selected. This training cannot and must not be a "one-shot" proposition when the new salesperson is first employed. In addition to the initial training period, there must be a continuing type of training—which may be both on the job and off the job. Newton D. Baker once said: "The man who graduates today and stops learning tomorrow is uneducated the day after." We must realize that salesmen aren't "born" that way; they must be taught how to sell. The store buyer or department head should be ever alert to new and refreshing ideas and should pass them on to his salespeople at regularly scheduled training periods as well as during the course of the business day. Employees should be encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to attend special sales clinics and conferences and regularly scheduled academic courses to broaden their general background or to develop special skills. If the retailers would bear the costs of such courses as an added incentive, they would be handsomely repaid in the higher morale and sales productivity of those attending such courses.

The relatively low pay scale in retailing is another deterring factor in the improvement of retail selling. Better wages—in two forms—would do much toward raising the standard of retail selling. The profit-sharing plan used by Sears Roebuck & Co. and various other incentive plans adopted by other companies have shown dramatic results. But an increase in the monetary wage is not the only answer to the problem. Management can improve selling by giving some personal recognition—by being always friendly and warm toward the selling people. There is a loyalty which develops, as a by-product of these so-called "psychic income" factors, which is difficult to measure.

Another way to stimulate salespeople to do a better job of selling is to give them more knowledge of the products or services which they are selling. The woeful lack of product knowledge has already been pointed out. The buyer has access to much valuable information from merchandise sources, from large central markets, and from manufacturers' representatives. The latter should be encouraged to speak with the salespeople, to answer their questions, and to stimulate their interest in particular products. Plant visits can be very helpful, especially in the selling of complex items. If the piano salesman, for example, could visit the plant where the pianos are made, he would have an extra appreciation for the materials, the precision, and the

fine workmanship which are necessary before the finished product is ready for him to sell. Give a man knowledge, and he will talk, and sell, much more intelligently.

The retailer may attract and select the right people; he may have a good training department; his pay scale may be much higher than the average for the industry; and his people may be kept informed constantly in the matter of product knowledge; and yet, unless his people are actually taught the "how" of selling, his sales records may be only mediocre. The "how" phases of the actual selling process discussed below are only the skeleton.

Getting the attention of the customer is, of course, the first phase of any sale. In retailing this is accomplished to a large extent by novel promotional schemes or ideas geared to the type of clientele which is predominant in the community served. Ingenuity will pay off, but you can be wrong, and the retailer must be prepared to admit frequent mistakes in his attempts to attract attention. Psychology of emotional buying plays a large part in attention getting. Someone has said, for example, that there are eight things that make a woman buy: because her husband says she can't; because she wants to look thin; because it might have come from Paris; because her neighbors will see it; because nobody else has one; because everybody has one; because it's different; just because.

Arouse the prospective customer's interest by telling him what the goods or services will do to benefit or serve him. This should be the primary concern of every salesperson. The Principles of Rotary International, dated 1905, emphasize this principle as they state: "The ideal of service is the basis of all worthy enterprise." The noted writer, H. A. Overstreet, states it this way: "Selling, to be a great art, must involve a genuine interest in the other person's needs. Otherwise it is only a subtle, civilized way of pointing a gun and forcing one into a temporary surrender." When selling a piano, one does not sell it as a piece of furniture, but rather in terms of the enjoyment to be derived, or the talent to be developed, or the leadership qualities and self-confidence to be instilled in the child.

No prospect or customer ever wants to buy anything. In a recent year over a million quarter-inch drills were sold—not because people wanted the drills, but because they wanted quarter-inch holes. When you buy carbon paper, you buy copies of something—not the slippery, shiny, smudgy paper from which the copies print. When you buy records, what you really want is the enjoyment and relaxation afforded by the music which has been captured in the wax and offered as a record.

Closely allied with interest is the desire which must be aroused. To arouse desire, first determine the buying motive of your prospect. Then take these three steps in order: point out the customer's lack or want or need for the article you are selling; tell him how your article will supply that want; paint a word picture of his satisfaction or gratification as a result of buying your product. This is the old Wheeler idea; don't sell the car, sell the scenery; sell the "sizzle" instead of the steak. In arousing desire, you are really persuading people to want what they already need.

In gaining conviction, give your customer enough facts, and no more, about your product or service to convince him that he is justified in buying. This is where the product knowledge already discussed comes into play. Again, convince him, but don't asphyxiate him! Biblical history tells us that Samson slew one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. There

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are more than that many sales killed every day with the same weapon! Shakespeare gave good advice to the retail salespeople when he said: "Let thy speech be short, comprehending, much in few words." Another point to remember is to be a good listener—the salesman who knows when to say nothing shows a fine command of the language.

The final and most important phase of the retail sale is getting the decision. Often this can be accomplished by merely weighing the ideas in favor of buying against those opposed to buying. A decision can often be obtained by assuming that the customer is going to buy and asking some leading question, such as what size, what color, or when he wishes the item delivered.

Should the customer raise some objections, don't let them "floor" you. The great fighter, James J. Corbett said, "To become a champion, fight one more round," but don't literally "come out fighting." Good manners and soft words have answered a lot of objections.

To do a better job of retail selling in 1953, we must, above all, be able to interpret our customers' needs and then be able and willing to sell them the products or services which will satisfy those needs. This little, simple verse, author unknown, tells the story:

If you would sell John Smith
What John Smith buys
Then you must see John Smith
Through John Smith's eyes.

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